DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 260 344 CG 018 437

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TITLE Divorced Fathers Describe Their Current and Former Spouses: An Investigation of "Splitting".
PUB DATE Apr 85
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Rocky Mountain Psychological Association (Tucson, AZ, April 24-27, 1985).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attribution Theory; *Divorce; *Father Attitudes; *Fathers; Males; *Negative Attitudes; Psychological Patterns; *Remarriage; *Spouses
IDENTIFIERS Defense Mechanisms; *Splitting (Psychology)

ABSTRACT

Splitting, a primitive defense mechanism of young children in confusing or ambivalent situations, in psychoanalytic theory is characteristic of those with borderline or narcissistic diagnoses. It may recur in adults negotiating co-parenting relationships following divorce and remarriage. Two types of splitting may occur: self-other in which the other is seen as different from the self; and object-object in which the other is seen as different from a different other (in this case the present and former spouse). To investigate a consistent pattern of devaluation of women by their former husbands, 63 divorced fathers, 39 in their first year and 24 in their third to fifth year of remarriage, were studied. Participants completed the Adjective Checklist four times, describing themselves, their spouse, their children's mother (former spouse) and their ideal self. Analysis of the husband's descriptions showed that in their negative evaluations of their ex-wives husbands tended to contrast the present and former spouse and not themselves and the former spouse. Several trait domains were starkly polarized in this splitting process especially interpersonal power, interpersonal expressiveness, and impulse control. Although there may be reality-based explanations for husbands' devaluations of their ex-spouse, splitting is a useful construct for understanding the intrapsychic mechanisms influencing these reactions. The data suggest the widespread use of splitting in a non-clinical population. (MCF)

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# Divorced Fathers Describe Their Current and Former Spouses: An Investigation of "Splitting"[1]

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[1] Paper presented at the meeting of the Rocky Mountain Psychological Association, Tucson, Arizona, April 24-27, 1985.

# Divorced Fathers Describe Their Current and Former Spouses: An Investigation of "Splitting"

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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates a consistent pattern of devaluation of former wives by their former husbands. This pattern is both extreme, and occurs in "ordinary" people. In psychoanalytic theory, splitting is a primitive defense most characteristic of those with borderline or narcissistic diagnoses. This paper presents data that suggest widespread use of splitting in a non-clinical population.

The participants in this study are 63 divorced fathers who had recently remarried. They filled out a total of four Adjective Check Lists, describing themselves, their spouse, their former spouse, and their ideal self.

The present paper is interested less in the difference in the overall descriptions of ex-wife, current wife, and self, than in the ways one description is related to another. The effects of splitting are examined in terms of an attributional contrast. It is suggested that adjectival descriptions of relationships where there is splitting should be negatively correlated.

Despite the fact that husbands describe the ex-spouse in highly negative terms, their self-descriptions and descriptions of the ex-spouse tend to be positively correlated across the ACL personality scales. Evidence of splitting does appear in the negative correlations between husbands' ACL descriptions of present and former spouses.

This suggests that if splitting is operative for the remarried husband, it is relationships with others, not aspects of the self, that are contrasted. Important trait domains in which this occurs concern interpersonal power, interpersonal expressiveness, and impulse control.

## Introduction

This paper investigates a consistent pattern of devaluation of former wives by their former husbands. This pattern is remarkable because the devaluation is both extreme, and occurs in "ordinary" people. This pattern is of concern because there is strong evidence that interparental hostility is detrimental to children both in intact marriages and when interparental hostility continues into the post-divorce co-parenting relationship (Emory, 1982).

In psychoanalytic theory (e.g. Fairbairn, 1961; Kernberg, 1980) splitting is a process thought to occur in young children as the normal mode of dealing with a confusing and ambivalently experienced reality. As the individual matures and attains so-called object constancy, integration is possible. In adults splitting reoccurs as a defense. It is considered to be one of the more primitive defenses and is most characteristic of those with borderline or narcissistic diagnoses (Kernberg, 1980). Here we present data that we believe show widespread use of this so-called primitive defense in a non-clinical population.

When a divorced father remarries, he must negotiate a number of relationships which are unique to remarriage and for which there are few social guidelines. Perhaps most delicate, the new couple must work out a co-parenting relationship with his former wife. Yet, for many divorcing couples, hostility between the ex-spouses continues after the official divorce. Robert Weiss (1975) has noted: "Murderous phantasies in which the spouse is the victim do not seem especially rare. . .shared parenting of the children provides a convenient vehicle for the expression of post-marital malice."

Yet, the women these former husbands describe are not seen as whole people with good and bad traits, but rather as devalued part-objects.

Paradoxically, the composite description of former wives by their husbands is also strikingly similar to the wicked stepmother of fairy tales. In this situation, it is the current spouse that fills the role of stepmother.

We do not know what function this process may play in remarriage. Perhaps more negative evaluation of the former wife functions to form the new family's boundaries. Conversely, a strong negative evaluation may indicate that the current marriage is in trouble and that scapegoating of the former wife is occurring. We have found that, cross sectionally, those couples who were relatively less negative in their evaluation of the former wife tended to be more satisfied with their marriages, data suggestive of the second hypothesis.

Two types of splitting may occur in the remarriage context. Self-other splitting occurs when the other is seen as different and contrasting from the self: "I really tried to make the marriage work, she was just too self-centered for the give and take of marriage." Object-object splitting occurs when the other is perceived as very different from a different other; in this case the present and former spouse are contrasted: "They are as unlike as night and day: my first wife was a real witch, my second wife is an angel".

Whatever the mechanisms involved in splitting, it is possible to describe its outcomes in terms of the attributions that are made about the stereotyped and stigmatized other person. If the ex-wife is somehow perceived as a "split off" part of the husband's own personality, then his perception of her should contrast with his perception of himself. If, on the other hand, the husband splits in his interpersonal relationships, then the ex-wife would be perceived as split-off parts of some other person. In this situation, we would expect the husband's

perception of the current spouse to contrast markedly with that of the ex-wife.

## Methods

### Subjects.

The participants in this study are 63 divorced fathers who have recently remarried. Thirty-nine fathers were in their first year of marriage, and twenty-four couples were seen in their third to fifth years of marriage.

Couples were recruited primarily from the marriage license records of Alameda, Contra Costa, Fairfield, and San Mateo Counties in California. Records were searched for marriages recorded in 1979, 1980 and 1983. Participants were also recruited through referrals from subjects, informal contacts, newspaper advertisements, and contacting stepparent organizations.

The men had been married an average of 1.8 years, after having been divorced an average of 2.8 years. Their mean age was 35.9 years. Most were college graduates and upper middle class. They had an average of 1.7 children. These fathers were fairly involved with their children, spending an average of 12.7 days per month with them.

### The Adjective Checklist

The measure of self and other evaluation used in this study is the Adjective Checklist (Gough and Heilbrun, 1980) which consists of 300 adjectives and adjectival phrases commonly used to describe a person's attributes. Each Adjective Check List can be scored for thirty-seven personality variables. Each partner filled out a total of four ACL's, one describing themselves, their spouse, the children's mother (husband's former spouse), and their ideal self. For the research

reported here, only the husbands' descriptions are used.

The present work is interested not only in the difference in the husbands' overall descriptions of ex-wife, current wife, and self, but in the way one description is related to another. We believe that if the effects are splitting are examined in terms of an attributional contrast, then adjectival descriptions of people involved in relationships where there is splitting should be negatively correlated. The husbands' mean descriptions of their current and former partners differ significantly on a number of scales. It is a separate question to ask whether these descriptions are negatively correlated.

When one begins to examine scale score correlations across husbands' descriptions of self, partner, former partner, and ideal self, positive correlations between descriptions tend to occur more often than negative ones. This may reflect a general tendency to use the same adjectives in different descriptions; this is to be expected in a "repeated measures" situation. When negative correlations are observed, they are in contrast to this trend.

## Results

Table 1 gives a qualitative description of the former wives as seen by their husbands. These data are reported separately for husbands in the first and third years of remarriage. Note that these descriptions are quite unfavorable. The adjectives on the list with positive connotations, such as attractive, friendly, and good-looking, are indicative of the continued attachment between the ex-spouses (Kitson, 1982; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979). There is perhaps a trend toward a more favorable evaluation in the third year of remarriage, a "mellowing" effect that is more apparent in interviews with the new couple.

Table 2 shows the mean ACL scale elevations for both the current and former spouse as described by the man. Note the extreme negative description of the former wife on the Scales Favorable, Unfavorable, and Communality. These T-scores are 1 1/2 to more than two standard deviations from the mean in the negative direction. Such negative evaluations are very unusual in research using the ACL. In fact, the ACL decision rules for detecting invalid profiles tend to "throw out" a number of the ACL descriptions of the former wife as invalid.

Table 1 also contains T-Tests for the differences in mean scale elevations, indicating that most of the ACL scale scores are quantitatively very different for present and former wives. However, more interesting from the point of view of this paper are the correlations between the descriptions of current and former spouses on each scale. We are suggesting that the correlations between scale scores for various ACL descriptions provide an index of attributional contrast relevant to the defense mechanism of splitting. These correlations for husbands' descriptions of the present and former spouse appear in the first column of Table 2.

Figure 1 displays the patterns of correlations between husbands' descriptions of themselves, their partners, and their ex-spouses. It lists the scales that are significantly correlated for husbands' ACL descriptions of themselves and their partners, themselves and their former spouses, and of their descriptions of their partners and their ex-spouses.

As can be seen in the top part of Figure 1, across the 37 ACL scales, husbands descriptions of themselves tend to be positively correlated with their descriptions of their partners. Despite some significant differences in elevations of scales for self and partner, in

this case their views of self and other are highly complementary: they tend to rate the partner as high or low on a scale when they rate themselves as high or low on the scale.

The next results are displayed in the lower part of Figure 1. Surprisingly, husbands whose self descriptions are high on a particular scale also tend to also describe their former as high on the scale, for a number of scales. Only the scale for Dominance is negatively correlated across descriptions of self and former spouse. The significance of this scale will be mentioned below.

Evidence of splitting appears in husbands' evaluations of present and former spouses. The scales with significant correlations between husbands' ACL descriptions of the partner and descriptions of the former spouse are listed in the right hand portion of Figure 1. In marked contrast to the other pairs of descriptions examined, eight scales are negatively correlated. Only two scales are positively correlated: Number checked, which reflects a general response disposition or modus operandi in approaching the ACL task, and Military Leadership. Dominance, Exhibitionism, Autonomy, Aggression, Abasement, Deference, Self Control, and the Transactional Analysis scale Free Child are all negatively correlated at the the .05 level or better.

It is also interesting to look at husbands' ACL descriptions of their "Ideal self" in relation to the other ACL descriptions. Husbands' ACL's for Self and Ideal self tend to be positively correlated over the scales. The Partner and Ideal Self ACL's also tend to be positively correlated. Interestingly enough, the husbands' ACL's for Ideal Self and for the Former Spouse tend to be unrelated, non-significantly correlated for all but two scales (one positive and one negative significant correlation).

## Discussion

These data suggest that if splitting is operative in husbands' views of their ex-wives, then this splitting mainly occurs between perceptions of past and present intimate relationships, rather than directly between ideas about aspects of the self. Inasmuch as the negative view of the ex-wife *is* related to contrasted *self*-attributions, the personality trait of *Dominance* is relevant. *Dominance* is defined as "to seek and maintain a role as leader in groups, or to be influential and controlling in individual relationships" (Gough and Heilbrun, 1980). This suggests that the husbands' perceptions of self and ex-spouse tend to polarize on a dimension of interpersonal power: Husbands who tend to rate themselves as interpersonally dominant tend to rate their ex-spouses as low on this scale, and vice versa.

Negative correlations exist for eight scales when husbands' descriptions of their current and former partners are compared. This indicates that in general the husbands do tend to describe their current and former partners in contrasting ways. On these traits, if a husband rates his present wife as high, he will rate his former partner as low, and vice versa. Both processes of idealization of the current wife and devaluation of the former wife may be occurring here, and it is also possible to explain this process in terms of cognitive dissonance.

An examination of the ACL scales on which these negative correlations are found serves to elucidate the personality traits that are salient in this *object splitting*. As was the case in the presumed *self-other* splitting described above, interpersonal power, assertiveness, and compliance represent important domains. In addition to *Dominance*, *Abasement* and *Deference* are also negatively correlated for

descriptions of current and former wives. The definition of Abasement is "to express feelings of inferiority through self-criticism, guilt, or social impotence". Deference is defined as "to seek and maintain subordinate roles in relationship with others". Autonomy is another scale in this domain. It is defined as "to act independently of others or of social values and expectations".

Another trait domain, one having to do with interpersonal expressiveness, is covered by Exhibitionism, defined as "to behave in such a way as to elicit the immediate attention of others". This is a scale that appears to tap histrionic personality traits and behaviors. The Transactional analysis scale Free Child may also be related to this domain, and reflects spontaneity and expressiveness.

A final domain in which attributional contrast and perhaps splitting occurs is concerned with impulse control. This is related, of course, to the construct domain of interpersonal expressiveness mentioned above. Aggression is defined as "to engage in activities that attack or hurt others". Self-Control is a topical scale having to do with responsibility, fastidiousness, and cognitive and affective control over oneself.

The extremely negative terms with which these husbands describe the former spouse is striking. A number of factors, both personological and situational may account for this view of the children's mother. One explanation is that these men are accurately describing their former wives. However, on the basis of probability, we suspect that the 63 former wives should more accurately have a mean of around 50 on the scales. Another explanation for the extremely negative ACL descriptions is that men lacking in self-esteem may devalue their former wife to alleviate feelings of rejection, hurt and anger from the divorce.

However this explanation is not supported by other data. There is no correlation between a husband's low self-esteem and more negative evaluations of the former wife.

It is likely that the situation of former husbands and second wives in relation to the children's mother (the ex-spouse) and each other would make most people somewhat insecure and biased observers. One also would not guess from the negative way husbands describe their former wives that they were once in love with them. Perhaps this is also part of the problem. Divorce researchers have noted that most men and women going through divorce do continue to have feelings of attachment toward their spouses (Weiss, 1975; Spanier & Casto, 1979; Brown, et al., 1980). A way to fight that pull may be to devalue their former spouse.

It is also likely that former wives often <u>are</u> "emotional", "defensive", and "demanding" in <u>situations</u> where they are their dealing with the ex-husband and his new partner. In addition, sharing her child with her former husband and his new wife must raise any number of serious concerns for a mother. Examples are concerns that the child may be mistreated or over-indulged, that the children prefer the stepmother or the other family, that the other family will not teach consistent values, and so on. All these feeling may impel the children's mother to behave in a manner that is perceived by the new couple as defensive, demanding, emotional, etc.

Divorce is an extremely unsettling event for most people, and even the best adjusted have difficulty handling it well. Wallerstein and Kelly (1979) and Weiss (1975) have well chronicled the sexual acting out, child neglect, drug and alcohol abuse, violence, and psychological problems of separating marital partners. Where this unusual behavior manifests itself most intensely is in the relations between former

spouses. Husbands may forget or excuse their own atypical behavior while making trait attributions about their former wife's behavior. Finally, one can speculate that anger felt toward the children may also be displaced upon the former spouse.

All of this suggests that there are good, external, reality-based explanations for husbands' (and, incidentally, their new partners') devaluation of the ex-spouse, in terms of characteristics of the post-divorce family. However, it is also likely that intrapsychic mechanisms influence these fathers' reactions to external events. In this case splitting is a useful construct.

The present research suggests that if splitting is operative in the negative evaluations of the ex-spouse by their former husbands, then what are split off are aspects of object-relations, not of the self per se. Of course, some theorists equate aspects of object relations and aspects of the self. Nevertheless, in this sample, husbands do not tend to contrast their descriptions of themselves and their ex-wives.

They do, however, starkly polarize their descriptions of their current and their former wives. The present research suggests that several trait domains are particularly important in this splitting process: interpersonal power, interpersonal expressiveness, and control of impulses, especially angry ones.

It is also interesting that despite the fact that idealization (of the current partner) may be involved in the object splitting process, the descriptions of the ideal self are curiously unrelated (either in terms of positive or negative correlations) to the descriptions of the ex-wife. This is suggestive of some form of "isolation" or "compartmentalization" of relationships.

Whatever the intrapsychic drama involved here, these former spouses

are still parents, and they may need to negotiate a relationship that allows them effectively to co-parent their child. It has been demonstrated that interparental hostility contributes to lessened contact with the non-custodial parent. Interventions with divorcing families will need to address both internal and external aspects of the relationship between ex-spouses.

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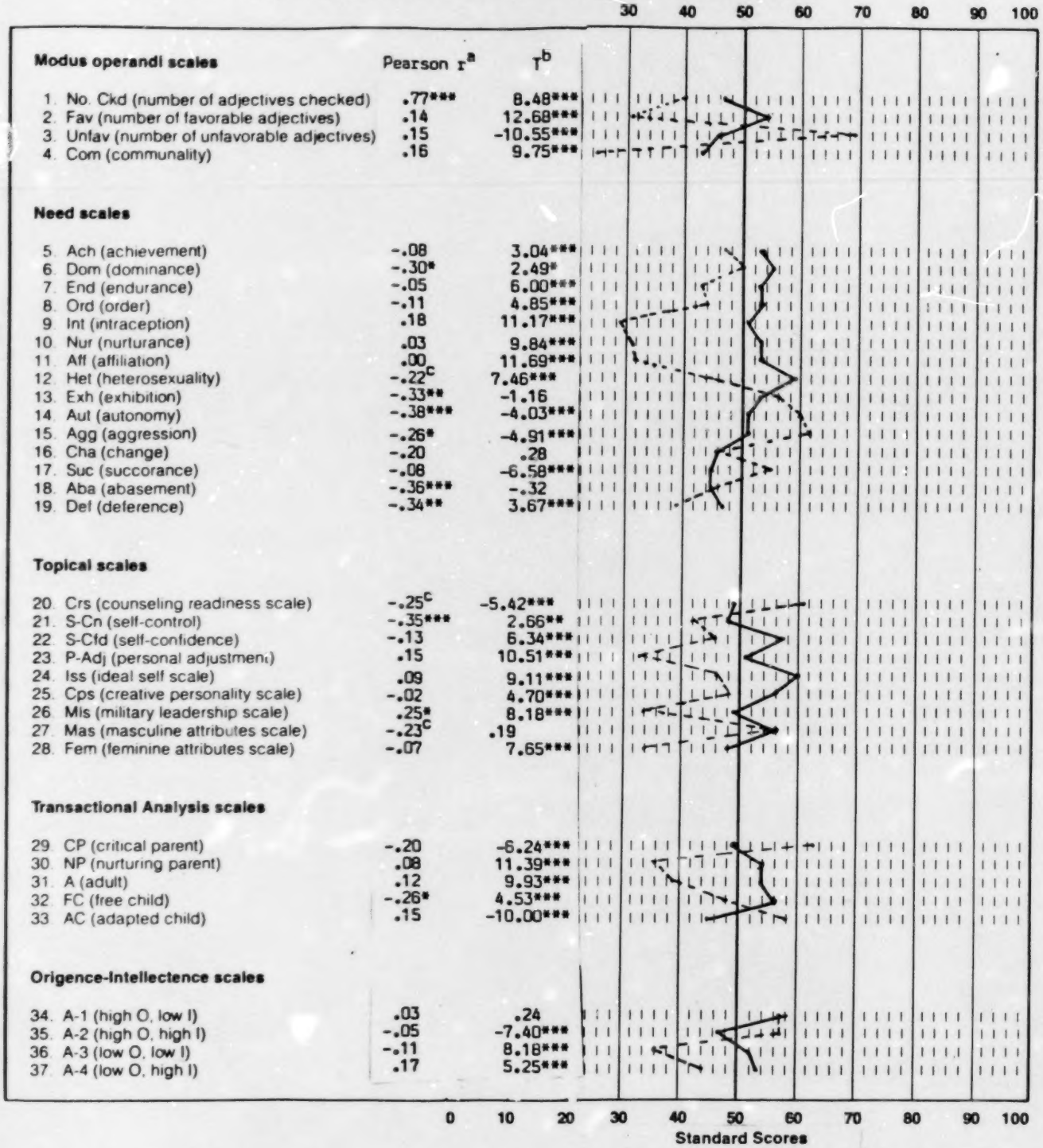
Table 1

Most Frequently Checked Adjectives with which Men Describe their Former Wives

| Percentage Checking | First Year | Percentage Checking | Third Year |
|---|---|---|---|
| 82% | defensive | 71% | attractive |
| 66% | emotional | 66% | defensive |
| | dissatisfied | 56% | good-looking |
| 63% | attractive | | intelligent |
| | resentful | 51% | dissatisfied |
| 61% | confused | | emotional |
| | demanding | | healthy |
| 58% | friendly | 49% | demanding |
| | complaining | | friendly |
| 55% | opinionated | | hard-headed |
| | bitter | | stubborn |
| 53% | healthy | 46% | assertive |
| | argumentative | | headstrong |
| | intelligent | | resentful |
| | fault-finding | | self-centered |
| | capable | 44% | clever |
| 50% | hard-headed | | argumentative |
| | good-looking | | active |
| | tempermental | | responsible |
| | vindictive | | |
| | suspicious | | |

Table 2
Husbands' Descriptions of Their Present and Former Spouses:
Mean ACL Profiles, T-Tests for Differences in Scale Means, and
Correlations Between Present and Former Spouse Scale Scores

| Modus operandi scales | Pearson r[a] | T[b] |
|---|---|---|
| 1. No. Ckd (number of adjectives checked) | .77*** | 8.48*** |
| 2. Fav (number of favorable adjectives) | .14 | 12.68*** |
| 3. Unfav (number of unfavorable adjectives) | .15 | -10.55*** |
| 4. Com (communality) | .16 | 9.75*** |
| **Need scales** | | |
| 5. Ach (achievement) | -.08 | 3.04*** |
| 6. Dom (dominance) | -.30* | 2.49* |
| 7. End (endurance) | -.05 | 6.00*** |
| 8. Ord (order) | -.11 | 4.85*** |
| 9. Int (intraception) | .18 | 11.17*** |
| 10. Nur (nurturance) | .03 | 9.84*** |
| 11. Aff (affiliation) | .00 | 11.69*** |
| 12. Het (heterosexuality) | -.22[c] | 7.46*** |
| 13. Exh (exhibition) | -.33** | -1.16 |
| 14. Aut (autonomy) | -.38*** | -4.03*** |
| 15. Agg (aggression) | -.26* | -4.91*** |
| 16. Cha (change) | -.20 | .28 |
| 17. Suc (succorance) | -.08 | -6.58*** |
| 18. Aba (abasement) | -.36*** | -.32 |
| 19. Def (deference) | -.34** | 3.67*** |
| **Topical scales** | | |
| 20. Crs (counseling readiness scale) | -.25[c] | -5.42*** |
| 21. S-Cn (self-control) | -.35*** | 2.66** |
| 22. S-Cfd (self-confidence) | -.13 | 6.34*** |
| 23. P-Adj (personal adjustment) | .15 | 10.51*** |
| 24. Iss (ideal self scale) | .09 | 9.11*** |
| 25. Cps (creative personality scale) | -.02 | 4.70*** |
| 26. Mls (military leadership scale) | .25* | 8.18*** |
| 27. Mas (masculine attributes scale) | -.23[c] | .19 |
| 28. Fem (feminine attributes scale) | -.07 | 7.65*** |
| **Transactional Analysis scales** | | |
| 29. CP (critical parent) | -.20 | -6.24*** |
| 30. NP (nurturing parent) | .08 | 11.39*** |
| 31. A (adult) | .12 | 9.93*** |
| 32. FC (free child) | -.26* | 4.53*** |
| 33. AC (adapted child) | .15 | -10.00*** |
| **Origence-Intellectence scales** | | |
| 34. A-1 (high O, low I) | .03 | .24 |
| 35. A-2 (high O, high I) | -.05 | -7.40*** |
| 36. A-3 (low O, low I) | -.11 | 8.18*** |
| 37. A-4 (low O, high I) | .17 | 5.25*** |




[a] n = 62.

[b] DF = 61. A positive value of T means that the current spouse's score is higher.

* p < .05
** p < .01
*** p < .005

[c] Negative correlation approached significance. Two-tailed tests of significance used for the correlations.

Note. ——— = current spouse.
--------- = former spouse.



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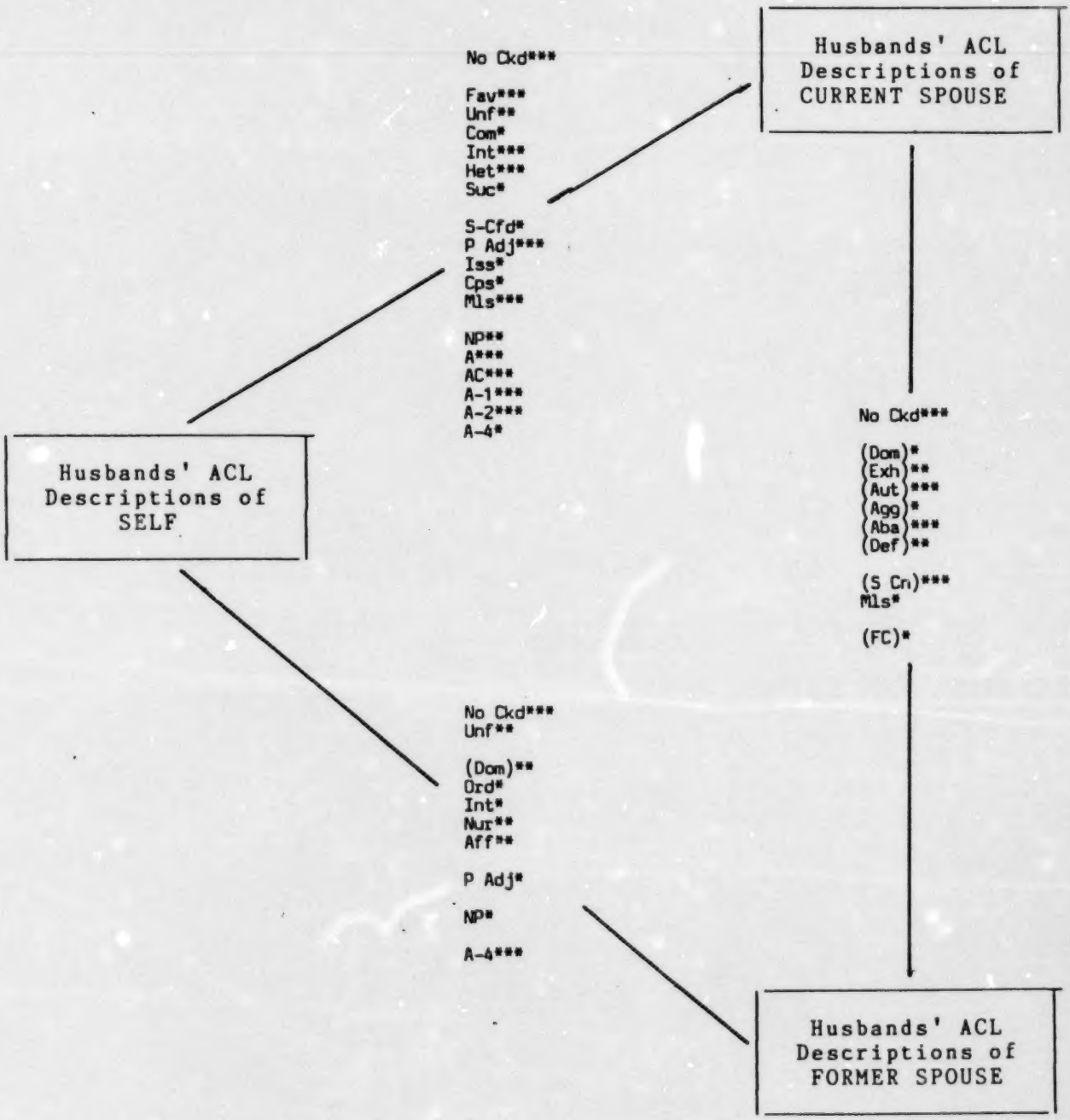
Figure 1
Husbands Describe Themselves, and Their Current and Former Spouses:
ACL Scales with Significant Correlations Between Descriptions




* $p \leq .05$
** $p \leq .01$
*** $p \leq .005$

Two-tailed tests of significance used for the correlations.

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